

## **Epilogue:**

### **Parks in the Post-Industrial World**

From the Visitor Center at Guadalupe Mountains National Park, the world spreads out before the eyes of an observer. In the baked summers, the land seems to shimmer from the heat, appearing to offer the mirages of lore. Mexico must be off in the distance, and the *llano*, the famed plains of west Texas, seem to stretch forever. Looking into the distance, it would be easy to spot Clint Eastwood riding out of the haze, the “Man with No Name” of Spaghetti Western fame to characterize a place best known to only a few. More readily, it requires no effort here to imagine standing on a prehistoric shoreline and looking out over the vast shallow inland sea, warm and full color. Even the base of Guadalupe Peak offers that feeling of power that high places give. Before the internal combustion engine and before airplanes, that vantage, that elevation, gave so much to anyone who stood there. The mountains sheltered, their lofty perch allowing anyone who watched from them to see all who approached.

This great advantage was defensive in nature and could not transcend the peripheral advantages for humanity of the Guadalupe Mountains, southeastern New Mexico, and the entire trans-Pecos region. Everyone who crossed the historical stage found its attributes lean, and in their own way, each ran up against the fundamental limits of human endeavor in aird places. Most took what they could from the area; few settled it. Only with the addition of industrial society’s accouterments could the region be harnessed, settled, and made home to more than the few who spread across it before the railroad, the automobile, and the market economy.

This reality, this trick of fate, offered only one advantage. It made the people who stayed adaptable in ways all who departed were not. The act of remaining in a place from which coaxing a living was a strenuous, ongoing, always tenuous task from the beginning of human memory signified a willingness to change, to try new strategies, to do whatever it took to survive. In this all the people who lived in the region shared an essential trait, one that gave them a necessary malleability even as the American economy began to change and the assumptions of industrial America first seemed archaic and then began to fall away. The reality that hit the rest of the nation with full power in the 1980s and 1990s only seemed a stage in an ongoing process of change in the trans-Pecos and southeastern New Mexico.

In the aftermath of the 1974 OPEC oil embargo, the United States entered a new economic phase in which its industrial production initially ceased to be competitive in the world market, bottomed out, and then was reconstituted in a new and distinctly different form. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was both a reflection of that change and a force that accelerated it: Reagan was elected because he promised a return to a world that had gone by. The actions he undertook as president accelerated both the arrival and the impact of the new economic world. Sadly, much of the nation was unprepared for the changes that followed in the wake of the move toward a service economy, a moment often mislabeled as the beginning of the "Information Age." The wrenching dislocation that the recession of 1982 produced, the transfer of wealth and power from the once-proud industrial northeast (renamed the "Rust Belt"), to the Sun Belt of the South and Southwest, the enormous debt that resulted from ruinous deregulation of the savings and loan industry and the expansion of consumer credit, and the rambunctious optimism and sometimes chauvinism of the wealthy and a new political intelligentsia that accompanied the change all were hallmarks of a culturally different America.

These changes profoundly affected Guadalupe Mountains and Carlsbad Caverns, but in markedly different ways. Carlsbad Caverns suffered; it was an icon of the older America, of an earlier time and place. Its location was not conducive to the hurry-up pace of the time-driven world of the 1980s and 1990s. Far from the interstate highways, the community around the national park had to be a resort and a destination, traits it did not genuinely possess in the 1980s and 1990s, to attract the vast numbers of visitation that flocked to the park in earlier generations. The kind of visitor that once sought Carlsbad Caverns was drawn to other places, often imitations of the kind of experience that the caves offered. Disneyland, Las Vegas, and the array of theme parks soon had a greater hold on a large segment of the traveling public than did the spectacular caverns beneath the ground of southeastern New Mexico. To generations raised on television that could easily discern but did not seem to care about the difference between authentic and imitation, the appeal of Carlsbad was not great enough to supersede the distance from the interstate, the long and often agonizing drive on two-lane roads, and the lack of laser or light shows or even television screens in the cavern. After the dawn of Music Television (MTV), after cable television, Walkmans, laser discs, holograms, and the spate of techno-tricks that dominated the big and little screens, the spectacular caverns at Carlsbad lost at least some of their power to awe the many jaded by a plethora of rapid-fire images.

In no small part, this transition stemmed from the range of experiences available to Americans as the nation passed from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. For the people of the 1930s, many of whom were lucky to have access to a radio, Carlsbad Caverns seemed remarkable, impossible, a wonder of the world. The very idea that they could drive to these spectacular caverns and then ride an elevator down into them,

hundreds of feet below the surface, was incomprehensible to someone who lived in a small town most of their life. By the 1980s, even teenagers had at their command a vast array of images of the real and the fantastic from around the globe. They could see the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, and Darth Vader without ever leaving their living rooms and they often possessed few critical skills that could help them differentiate among such disparate images. In this world of competing images delivered to the home television screen, places such as Carlsbad Caverns had a much harder time persuading the young of their significance. Everyone understood that Carlsbad Caverns was authentic; what the changes in the nature and availability of images called into question was the meaning of that authenticity.

At Guadalupe Mountains, that distance from a four-lane highway gave an entirely different constituency the peace its members sought. A specific following for wilderness-type travel remained, people who actively sought alternative experiences apart from the dominant vectors of American travel. Away from the mainstream, these people found solace and authenticity, a range of experiences that put them in touch with what they believed most important about the human experience. The more than one-hundred-mile drive from El Paso and the more than forty miles from Carlsbad Caverns made the location of Guadalupe Mountains perfect for such activities. The spectacular scenery, remote trails, and the large uninhabited distances made the park an outstanding example of a remote park that catered to a specific segment of the travel market. The time required just to reach the Visitor Center, let alone the specialized knowledge and skill necessary to surmount the difficult trails and terrain, assured that the people who embraced the park recognized their experiences as different from what they usually regarded as the herd-like mentality of the mainstream. The very act of choosing Guadalupe Mountains National Park in and of itself made an important cultural statement to the very people who chose it. Accurately or misguided, they told themselves that the activities they were engaged in were more substantial than those of ordinary visitors because of the distance they traveled to reach the park and because of the degree of difficulty their attainments involved. This designation served as a marker between these people and the more general public.

The Park Service always possessed a soft spot for the specialty visitor — the traveler who in their values, beliefs, and desires mirrored those of the people who self-selected careers in the agency. Such visitors often seem like intellectual relatives to park rangers, people with whom they could become friends. Rangers encouraged this constituency, sparing them the derogatory nicknames often associated with less-enthusiastic and more sedentary visitors. At parks that attracted such visitors, a camaraderie even stronger than the typical powerful intra-park relationships in the Park Service often bloomed. When the park staff and a visible percentage of visitors shared similar values about the resources of any park, as they did at Guadalupe Mountains National Park, a meaningful *esprit de corps* that Stephen T. Mather would have embraced permeated the park.

In a regional economic climate in which tourism had finally been recognized as gaining in

significance, the changing patterns of visitation asked important questions of the Park Service. By the late 1980s, many western states had begun to shift their emphasis toward attracting tourists as a primary economic strategy. With almost an entire century of experience promoting tourism, New Mexico was prominent among them, but even its leaders wondered how this transformation would take place. As late as 1989, state Economic Development and Tourism Commission members loudly asserted that New Mexico needed a strategy to survive in the tourist game. New Mexico's historic advantages were as vulnerable in the post-industrial as those of its leading national park.<sup>1</sup>

Again, the trans-Pecos led in the move to greater investment in tourism as a strategy. Much of southern New Mexico and far western Texas long recognized the limits of the traditional forms of economy that dominated the region. The list of panaceas and programs, from irrigation to WIPP, attested to the ongoing struggle to thrive. The move to tourism there seemed natural, less fraught with the abandonment of traditional values than in places where the factory had closed and tourism seemed a salve for the woes of the displaced. Studies of tourism and tourism bureaus cropped up all over New Mexico. Las Cruces, home of New Mexico State University, stood out as one of the communities most actively courting tourism, as Santa Fe in the north blossomed as a destination, transformed for visitors with all the tension that process implied.<sup>2</sup>

The move to tourism validated historic patterns in southeastern New Mexico as it challenged long-standing assumptions about the place. Jed Howard, a teacher at Carlsbad High School and an astute chronicler and regional historian, observed that tourism had "always been a shadow economy, one people tried to overlook." Serving tourists seemed to lack substance, he continued, and seemed to lessen the people of the region in their own estimation. As a result, they rationalized its importance, diminishing it as they held up more traditional activities-- agriculture, ranching, and after 1980, WIPP — as holding the future of the region.<sup>3</sup>

The changing socioeconomic climate affected the two parks differently. Carlsbad Caverns National Park found itself prepared for the shift in emphasis and the greater recognition of its significance in the regional economy. The park offered statistics about the dollar value of visitation in the region in a range of circumstances, illustrated the employment benefits and the

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<sup>1</sup> Todd G. Dickson, "New Mexico Lacks Tourism Strategy," *Las Cruces Sun-News*, March 11, 1989; Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 350-83.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Gemoets, "NMSU May Do Tourism Study," *Las Cruces Sun-News*, November 23, 1988; Lee Gemoets, "Bureau Plans Tourism Study," *Las Cruces Sun-News*, June 22, 1989; Stacey Bush, "Las Cruces Courts the Tourist Trade," *Las Cruces Sun-News*, July 2, 1989; Bruce Selcraig, "Glitz and Growth Take a Major Hit in Santa Fe," *High Country News*, August 8, 1994; Bruce Selcraig, "Lack of Enchantment: Santa Fe's Boom Goes Flat," *High Country News*, 28 2 (February 5, 1996), 1, 14-16; Candelaro Versace, "A Tale of Two Mayors: Santa Fe's Embattled Debbie Jaramillo," *Crosswinds*, December 1995, 14-16.

<sup>3</sup> Jed Howard, interview by Hal Rothman, Carlsbad, New Mexico, July 19, 1996.

funds that research, capital development, and construction generated at the park, but park officials faced a recurring problem: visitation, the key to future growth, held constant when it did not fall, and its average level remained below that of the 1970s. An irony permeated the situation: at the moment that Carlsbad Caverns National Park was best positioned to fulfill the needs of the region, the source of its growth, visitation, slowed.

In the Guadalupe Mountains, the changing conditions pointed to a different future, one more infused with visitors than the past. As the park approached its twenty-fifth birthday, growing numbers of visitors, more than 220,000 annually by the mid-1990s, challenged the attributes of a twelve-mile-wide wilderness park. The trail to Guadalupe Peak, the highest point in Texas, was well trod, sometimes too well. Nevada Barr, a Park Service ranger who wrote intriguing mysteries set in national park areas, captured the spirit of this dichotomy in *Track of the Cat*, set in Guadalupe Mountains National Park. During the heart of a murder investigation, Ranger Anna Pigeon, the protagonist, is detailed to monitor the Pentacostal Church's annual fund-raising hike to Guadalupe Peak. "People of all ages swarming up Guadalupe Peak," Pigeon recounts in a typical Park Service dilemma. "Overweight men, women and girls in dresses, nobody carrying food, many carrying no water at all or a quart to be shared by a family of four when every man, woman, and child would need at a least a half gallon to make it comfortably-- and safely--the ten miles to the top of the mountain and back."<sup>4</sup> Barr's fanciful account rang increasingly true, especially to those who coveted the solitude, the peace, the whistle of the wind that characterized the desert park.

Southeastern New Mexico and the trans-Pecos and its bookends, Carlsbad Caverns and Guadalupe Mountains national parks, embody that solitude. Even in the most crowded moments in the caverns of Carlsbad, when the voices of visitors drown out the silence and a trip through the Big Room feels much like a walk through a city park, an area nearly devoid of people is only a few feet away. The trail to the top of Guadalupe Peak may be crowded, but in the waterless Guadalupe Mountains back country, people remain few and far between even at the height of backpacking season.

Other attempts to harness the Guadalupe and Delaware Mountains include Texas's first wind power plant, on the Six Bar Ranch about 100 miles east of El Paso and visible on the approach to Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Built at a cost of almost \$40 million, 112 eighty-foot-high wind turbine towers, each topped by a fifty-two-foot fiberglass propeller, generate 35 megawatts of power, which the Lower Colorado River Authority purchases and transmits to its customers in central Texas.<sup>5</sup> Wind energy offers another of the many economic strategies in the region, potentially a valuable source of revenue, but one likely limited to a small

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<sup>4</sup> Nevada Barr, *Track of the Cat* (NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), 85-91.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Hight, "Power Blowin' in the Wind," *Austin American-Statesman*, October 1, 1995, D1, D4; Guadalupe Mountains National Park, "Kennetech Wind Generation Project," (n.d.), Carlsbad Caverns National Park files.

work force. As was mining and oil and gas development, wind energy was extractive. Its impact was visual, with the spires of the towers juxtaposed incongruously along the horizon. To some, its marring of the skyline was as objectionable as the oil derricks that stretched across west Texas and southeastern New Mexico.

Carlsbad Caverns also included a 33,125-acre designated wilderness established in 1978, which provided an important intellectual link between the two parks. Since the environmental revolution of the 1970s, the back country at Carlsbad had been an alternative to the cave experience. Despite more than sixteen million visitors to the park by 1971, former park naturalist Neal R. Bullington wrote that “most went away knowing almost nothing of Carlsbad Caverns National Park. For to most visitors the cavern is the park. Seven miles of entrance road and a few acres with buildings represent the sum total of their park experience above ground.” The only pavement in the 46,000-acre park was the entrance road, offering the possibility for wilderness experience such as offered in Guadalupe Mountains National Park. The establishment of the wilderness codified that perception, linking Carlsbad caverns more closely with the dominant ethos of the 1970s. At Carlsbad Caverns, as in most wilderness areas, the wilderness was as much symbol as an attainable goal. Between 1989 and 1993, use of the wilderness area for overnight stays never exceeded 446 in any year. In 1994, 733 overnight stays were recorded. The reverence for the concept of wilderness but its limited use mirrored the experience of Guadalupe Mountains National Park. It also increased the shared cultural terrain between Carlsbad Caverns and Guadalupe Mountains national parks; managed jointly until 1987, they also offered experiences that converged.<sup>6</sup>

Carlsbad Caverns was an important economic engine in southeastern New Mexico. In 1991, the park employed the equivalent of ninety-five full-time employees. The concessionaires employed thirty-five people full-time throughout the year and another fifty-five during the peak travel season. The payroll injected more than \$3.3 million into the area, coupled with the more than \$50 million directly generated by tourism and an additional \$5 million in additional commerce stemming from the park and its visitors. Carlsbad Caverns played a significant role in the regional economy, on par with almost every other industry in the region.<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, the region gradually grew to understand and accept the park’s importance.

Yet that acceptance, long coveted by the Park Service, illustrated the problems of parks on the periphery. Visitation to Carlsbad seemed mired well below the historic highs of the 1970s; between 1985 and 1995, the annual totals remained in a range between a low of 586,954 in 1990 and a high of 645,526 in 1985. This fluctuation illustrated a problem first recognized during the late 1970s: visitation to Carlsbad Caverns seemed to have peaked; while

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<sup>6</sup> Neal R. Bullington, “Carlsbad Backcountry,” *National Parks and Conservation Magazine* V. 46 no. 6 (June 1972): 8-12.

<sup>7</sup> Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 359.

evidence of intermittent growth existed, stagnation more aptly described the condition.<sup>8</sup> At the moment the region again depended on federal endeavor, when it seemed best prepared to recognize the significance of the tourist economy, the park apparently had run up against the realities of the American public's changing tastes.

By the 1990s, the two parks shared greater commonality. Visitation to Guadalupe Mountains increased, albeit mostly in the Visitor Center and on the trail Nevada Barr so poignantly described. The *de facto* division into sacred and profane space — space that humans use, from some perspectives, defile, and untrammelled space of the sort that preservationists such as John Muir and Edward Abbey advocated — had become as apparent at Guadalupe Mountains as at Carlsbad Caverns. On the periphery, national parks of evidently different character grappled with the same kinds of issues.

As the twenty-first century approached, southeastern New Mexico and the trans-Pecos remained much as they had been throughout the twentieth century, a periphery dominated by outside forces. By the 1990s, the most significant such forces were federal endeavors, making the two parks in the region its bookends. The limits of geographic and technology illustrated the situation: as conventional forms of economy fell by the wayside, the entire subregion embraced the service economy concept well before the rest of the nation. The result was a place people visited, a place they revered for its beauty, magnificence, and solitude, one to which they came to retire, and a place where they exploded atomic devices and planned to store their nuclear waste. The history of the region provided a conundrum that the Mescalero people would certainly have understood: consigned to a nearly useless reservation on the periphery of their historic range, in sight of the mountains that once sheltered them, they too experienced the process of being coveted by an outside that wanted their land, but in the end, had little use for them. This was the problem of the periphery in the post-industrial world: how to maintain identity and economy, how to resist transformation and yet retain the ability to stay. The bookends, the two national parks, provided mitigating institutions, but in and of themselves they were only part of a solution to regional problems.

The story of the Carlsbad Caverns National Park and Guadalupe Mountains National Park area and its surroundings highlights most of the important themes in the history of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Southwest. Places once remote and inhospitable, lacking the necessities to sustain pre-industrial Anglo-Americans and others, developed slowly. Entrepreneurs played an important role, as did outside forces such as railroads and state legislatures. The federal government established a presence with military personnel that it retained through the Park Service and other agencies. Home to a hardy few with strong and deep ties, such places maintained a kind of iconoclastic independence. Transportation technologies provided the catalyst for long-term transformation, creating new economic and social relations to accompany improved access. Over time this led to changes in patterns of land

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<sup>8</sup> Superintendent's Annual Report, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, 1977, 1985, 1990, 1995.

ownership and use, and eventually to the kind of public-private partnership exemplified by the activities of people such as Wallace Pratt at Guadalupe Mountains National Park. This subregion, around which so much activity has swirled, has an important and largely untold place in the history of the American Southwest. It tells the story of transformation of southeastern New Mexico and far western Texas and in a broader sense, that of the western United States.